

Special Issue on Southern European Countries Facing Neoliberal Globalization: An Introduction

*By Domenico Maddaloni**

In recent years, different communities of social scientists have debated on the present and future of southern European societies, implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – assuming a comparative perspective of analysis. Started perhaps in the 80s, in the context of the research on multiple development pathways (Arrighi, ed., 1985, Sapelli, 1995), the debate on southern Europe rapidly entered the field of comparative studies on welfare systems (Leibfried, 1992; Siaroff, 1994; Ferrera, 1996). Other scholars worked on southern European societies in their studies on international migration (King, Black, eds., 1997; King, ed., 2001) and political change (Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle, 1995; Morlino, 1998). More recently the economic recession, which severely affected southern European countries since 2007-2010, offered another chance to understand their specificities in a context that seem to place them once again on the periphery of European Union. This “Great Crisis” is indeed marking a sort of watershed in the history of southern European societies, changing their position in the international division of labor, in the hierarchies of international politics, and in their perceived cultural identity. Therefore, the “discursive construction” of southern Europe as an object of social research (Baumeister, Sala, 2015) has taken many steps forward in the last years, and this macro-regional dimension can be considered very important as a territorial level of analysis in many fields of social research.

This issue of AJSS hosts some papers whose attempt is to examine some of the most significant aspects of the changes underway in the countries of southern Europe in this era of neoliberal globalization. In his paper, Maddaloni tries to define a typology of individual and collective reactions to the Great Recession. Building on A. O. Hirschman’s attempt to frame individual and collective behaviors in response to a condition of decline, the paper maintains that they can be understood mostly in terms of a number of pathways based on different attitudes – exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. In addition, R. K. Merton’s social strain theory is used to clarify some aspects of the complex relationships between societal and cultural macro dynamics and micro reactions. This results in the identification of nine pathways of reaction to neoliberal globalization, each of them having their “markers” in different individual and/or collective behaviors, identifiable in some of the countries of southern Europe.

While the aim of the first paper is more on the theoretical side of the debate, the work by Addeo, Diana, Bottoni and Esposito is more on its methodological side. They try to develop an effective and reliable definition for the concept of Social Cohesion, starting from the contribution of those scholars

* Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Political, Social and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno, Italy.

(Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009) that claimed the inadequacy of measuring the welfare of a country only through economic indicators. Data are analyzed through an explorative factor analysis approach, whose main result is the creation of a Social Cohesion composite index and the ranking of all the 27 EU Member States. Their results show that all the southern European countries have in common a low score on the Social Cohesion index. This means that improving the Social Cohesion is a crucial step to enhancing the quality of a country. In fact, according to the Authors, many European governments should start tackling their domestic crisis using a wider perspective rather than merely focusing on economic indicators – for example, by including social cohesion policies to help the overall development of their countries.

If the concept of “southern Europe” as a rather coherent social whole is useful in the field of social inequalities, the paper by Ingellis points out that in other fields differences among the main countries of southern Europe may improve rather than decrease over time. Starting from the evidence that the economic impact of the crisis in countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain cause different changes in the labor market indicators, the analysis tries to test the theory of the existence of a “Mediterranean model” in the way in which the southern European countries reacted to the economic crisis. Ingellis compares the main economic and labor market indicators before and after the crisis. Her results show the existence of significant divergences among southern European countries in the way they were affected by the current crisis. This should lead to be cautious with the idea of a general convergence among southern European countries. In the field of labor market, the existence of a “Mediterranean model” is therefore open to contention.

Other papers address the theme of the changes brought about by neoliberal globalization in southern European societies through the case study of Italy. In his work, Bifulco tries to analyze how the neoliberal discourse tries to create political consent in this country. Under this perspective, the public discourse related to the reform of the pension system (2011) and the so-called “Jobs Act” (2014-15), reveals the attempt to build common sense on competitiveness, economic growth, free market, deregulation, social spending, debt sustainability, austerity, employment, supporting a notion of general interest and social priority. Ideas are never neutral, of course, and they are used in order to legitimize inequalities and the power of hegemonic classes. In this case, the views and interests of the working classes are moderately taken into consideration, through welfare provisions maintained in the last years. Nevertheless, the priority remains the deepening of a typically neoliberal economic system.

Whilst neoliberal narratives spread across politicians and the media system, feelings of aversion against the ruling class spread among the middle and the working classes, and this is leading to another important feature of southern European societies today – namely, populism. Focusing on Italy, the paper by Fruncillo analyzes the crisis of the party-dominated Italian political system, and the conditions in which populist formations gained acceptance.

Moreover, using the most recent literature on the subject, Fruncillotries to assess whether a populist attitude is widespread among Italian citizens, including such indicators as proximity to political parties, trust in representative institutions, the need for a strong leader and attitudes towards immigrants. Finally, the author tries to test the hypothesis that different forms of populism can be identified within the electorate, in line with their position on the traditional Left-Right spectrum. His results lead to identify a growing emphasis on leaders in the overall dynamics of political decision-making, with important consequences for the circuit of representation and political accountability.

Finally, the paper by Pastore presents some paradoxical aspects within the Italian route towards the Knowledge Society, proposing a critical analysis of the difficult transition from theory to practice in this field. According to the statistics released by OECD and Eurostat, Italy has fallen behind because of evident policy contradictions in this field. Even though the political discourse and the media widely use the rhetoric of the Knowledge Society, public resources for strategic educational programs are diminishing. Pastore maintains that, on this basis, only an authentic re-publicization of knowledge systems would allow the possibilities implied in the idea of an open educational system to be fully carried out and to enhance their participatory effects. The horizon of meaning can only be that of knowledge as a *common good* (Hess and Ostrom 2009), in order to renew democracy and public ethics. In the absence of such guidance, the whole Knowledge Society process would see the dominance of market logic and power that would further increase the gap in inequalities.

Perhaps the main contribution of this issue to the debate on the present and future of the southern European societies lies in the fact that the papers selected highlight the ambivalence and complexity of the processes underway in this part of the Old Continent. Therefore, whilst the implementation of the neoliberal agenda is going on all over the European Union, the impact of this set of changes on the southern European economies, societies, and politics, is apparently producing both some new convergences and new divergences. What seems common to all the countries – Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece – is the fact that these changes are producing a crisis of many of the most firmly established “national” institutions. It is very likely, therefore, that in the next future we will witness even more radical changes, which could also affect the European Union and the whole European society.

References

- Arrighi G (ed) (1985) *Semiperipheral Development. The Politics of Southern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, Sage, London-Beverly Hills.
- Baumeister M, Sala R (2015) *A long road South. Southern Europe as a discursive construction and historical region after 1945*, M Baumeister, R Sala (eds), *Southern Europe? Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece from the 1950s until the present day*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main – New York.

- Ferrera M (1996) The southern model of welfare in Social Europe, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6 (1): 17-37.
- Gunther R P, Diamandouros N, Puhle H-J (1995) *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Hess C, Ostrom E (2009) *La conoscenza come bene comune. Dalla teoria alla pratica [Knowledge as a common good. From theory to practice]*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.
- King R (ed) (2001) *The Mediterranean Passage: Migration and New Cultural Encounters in Southern Europe*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.
- King R, Black R (eds) (1997) *Southern Europe and the New Immigrations*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton.
- Liebfried S (1992) Towards a European Welfare State? On integrating the poverty regimes into the European Community, Z Ferge, J Kolberg (eds), *Social Policy in a Changing Europe*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.
- Morlino L (1998) *Democracy between Consolidation and Crisis: Parties, Groups, and Citizens in Southern Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sapelli G (1995) *Southern Europe since 1945. Tradition and Modernity in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey*, Longman, London.
- Siaroff A (1994) Work, welfare and gender equality: a new typology, D. Sainsbury (ed.), *Gendering Welfare States*, Sage, London-Beverly Hills.
- Stiglitz J E, Sen A, Fitoussi J-P (2009) *Report by the commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress*, Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.